

# SOME FURTHER RECORDS OF UNCOMMON MIGRANT WADERS NEAR DARWIN, N.T.

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## INTRODUCTION

The literature on uncommon migrant waders visiting the 'top end' of the Northern Territory has been detailed by McKean et al. (1976) and Thompson (1977, 1978); this paper provides details of further records.

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Little Ringer Plover, *Charadrius dubius*

This species has occurred frequently enough to ensure that a full description of each bird is not warranted. Recent sightings are therefore summarized in Table 1 below. In each case only a single bird was observed.

TABLE I. Recent Little Ringed Plover sightings near Darwin, N.T.

LOCALITIES	DATE	PLUMAGE	OBSERVERS
Sewerage Ponds, Sanderson	Oct. 14, 1978	Immature	J.L. McKean
Sewerage Ponds, Sanderson	Oct. 16, 1978	Immature	J.L. McKean, H.A.F. Thompson
Sewerage Ponds, Sanderson	Oct. 21, 1978	Immature	A.L. Hertog, J.L. McKean, H.A.F. Thompson
Sewerage Ponds, Sanderson	Jan. 13, 1979	Adult	A.L. Hertog, J.L. McKean, C. Stewart
Holmes Jungle Swamp, Berrimah	Sept. 11, 1979	Immature	J.L. McKean, K. & B. Richards
Triangle Pond, Sanderson	Nov. 17, 1979	Adult	A.L. Hertog
Sewerage Ponds, Sanderson	Jan. 13, 1980	Immature	W.R. Mason, J.L. McKean

The bird seen on October 21, 1978 was photographed in colour by H.A.F. Thompson. In the Second Amendments to the 1975 (RAOU 1978) the species was listed within brackets which apparently means that the species has never been collected or photographed in Australia. This is in itself no guarantee of authenticity as birds can be misidentified from photographs and specimens. In the same Amendment the Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* is recorded for the first time in Australia on the basis of birds photographed at Melville Bay which were identi-

fied firstly as Dominican Gulls *Larus dominicanus* (Boekel, 1976) and later as Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Van Tets, 1977). One of us (McKean) was involved in the identification of these Gulls but has since discovered the character on which he chiefly based his identification viz. the pattern of white on the primaries, is of dubious diagnostic value. McKean takes this opportunity to withdraw his opinion that the birds were Lesser Black-backed Gulls. The soft part colours unfortunately cannot in his opinion be safely relied on due to the poor quality of the colour slides.

Little Stint, *Calidris minuta*

A Stint with only one leg and in unusually dark eclipse plumage was discovered by the authors feeding on the edge of the Triangle Pond, Sanderson N.T. on November 22, 1979. Its badly abraded tail showed a great deal of white in flight and McKean wondered whether it might not be a Temmink's Stint *C. temminckii*. We collected it for a study skin and in the hand the slender bill of the Little Stint was readily apparent when cleaned of its covering of thick mud. The dark plumage was caused by the mantle and covert feathers showing a substantial dark blotch as opposed to the corresponding feathers in Red-necked Stints which are typically pale greyish with a dark shaft giving the effect of a thin dark line down the centre of each feather (Sinclair and Nicholls, 1976). We consider the identification of eclipse plumaged Little Stints to require skill and care beyond the capabilities of the average wishful thinking bird-watcher; but given extensive experience it should be possible. Bird banders however are in a better position than bird-watchers to identify Little Stints and in addition to the characters mentioned above are referred to the measurements and combination of measurements given by Prater et. al. (1977). We noticed our specimen lacked the minute palmation between the outer and mid-toe that is present in Red-necked Stints. If this were confirmed as being constant it would be useful in borderline cases. Our Little Stint specimen had more slender toes and a longer nasal aperture (3.1 mm versus 2.4 mm) than a live Red-necked Stint handled soon after, but here again large numbers should be examined before these features can be taken as having any diagnostic value.

The only previous published record of the species in Australia is a news item in The Bird Observer (Anon., 1977) which was seized upon and published in brackets by the RAOU Checklist Amendment Committee (1978) despite the fact that at least two members of that committee knew the bird had been successfully photographed. The speed with which this news item was acted upon is even more surprising when two

other similar reports in The Bird Observer announcing new species for Australia viz. Magellan Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus* and Long-tailed Cuckoo *Eydynamis taitensis* were missed by them as was the well documented account of the occurrence of the White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*.

It remains then to more fully document the original sighting. One of the authors (J.L. McKean), Mrs H.B. Gill, Fred T.H. Smith and Robert J. Swindley found a Little Stint in bright juvenile plumage at the edge of a pond at the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works farm, near Werribee, Victoria on January 22, 1979. Having seen an hour or so previously a Red-necked Stint in breeding plumage it was readily apparent that this Stint was different. The bird was in the company of several Red-necked Stints and seemed slightly smaller and slimmer than them. The bill was black, faintly decurved at the tip and decidedly more slender at the base and throughout than the bills of the Red-necked Stints. The underparts were completely white except for the sides of the breast near the angle of the wing which was suffused light brown and overlaid with short dark brown streaks. The streaks faded out towards the centre of the breast. The sides of the neck were also light brown with faint streaking and the off-white superciliary streak extending well past the eye. The crown was mid brown with dark brown streakings extending to the frons. Dorsally the bird was blackish brown with pale rufous edging to the feathers. The wing coverts were pale fawn with dark centres giving a variegated appearance.

Two pale fawn stripes, which were thought to be on the scapulars, ran down either side of the mantle. The nape was darkly marked with streaks extending on to the mantle. We managed to get within 5 to 6 metres of the bird and Robert Swindley secured a number of excellent colour photographs of it. These colour photographs have been compared against Museum skins by McKean and examined by numerous other workers some of whom are familiar with Little Stints in various plumages. Nobody has disagreed with our original identification of the bird as a Little Stint. The bird

was found and identified independently later in the day by J. Klapste and others. Over the next couple of weeks several other bird-watchers availed themselves of the opportunity of seeing this attractive wader. However it would appear that a number of observers saw the Red-necked Stint in breeding plumage and thought they had seen the Little Stint.

Ruff (Reeve) *Philomachus pugnax*

On November 15, 1979 we located a Reeve at the edge of a Sewerage pond at Sanderson. The bird was standing very erect and was noticeably larger than a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*. The breast was buff with brown streaking which indicates that it was juvenile (Prater et. al., 1977). The bird was flushed and the thin wing bar and conspicuous white patches on the sides of the base of the tail were noted. On November 17, 1979 at the nearby Triangle Pond, one of us (A.L. Hertog), saw two Reeves fly across the pond and into an erected mist-net. One bird escaped but the other was banded, measured, photographed (see Fig. 1) and released. Moulting was active only on the body feathers. Using the criteria given in Prater et.al. (1977) the bird was a first winter female and certainly a different individual from the first one sighted. Measurements taken in millimetres and grams were total length 258, wingspan 502, weight 89 exposed culmen 32.8 total culmen 37.5 wing 154.5, tail 54, tarsus 47.3, midtoe 29 and claw 7.7. Another sighting, but fleeting was made of a Reeve in the same area on November 23, 1979.

Wandering Tattler, *Tringa incana*

Thompson (1977) has summarized Northern Territory records. There have been two further sightings. A bird in eclipse plumage was seen and heard at Lee Point near Darwin on December 17, 1978 by Mike Reed, Hilary Thompson and McKean. It was identified on its distinctive long trilling call. A bird also in eclipse plumage was seen and heard at Camerons Beach, Shoal Bay, N.T. by A.L. Hertog on April 1, 1979. Again identification was based on its

distinctive long trilling call and plumage which was rather darker than the other Tattlers present.

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FIGURE 1 : Reeve captured at Triangle Pond, Sanderson, N.T. on November 17, 1979. Photo by John L. McKean.

## TYPHLINA BRAMINA AN ARBOREAL BLIND SNAKE?

by Stephen Swanson

*Typhlina bramina*, the Flower Pot Snake, occurs in Australia only in the vicinity of Darwin, Northern Territory. It is otherwise widely distributed from Asia to New Guinea. Its occurrence in the Darwin area is almost certainly attributable to inadvertent introduction by man, and its habit of frequenting soil around the roots of plants is presumably a key factor in its international distribution. In Darwin it is common in suburban gardens, but also occurs amongst the roots of such native plants as *Cycas*, in bushland some 70 km south of Darwin.

In the Darwin suburb of Parap, on the 15th of May 1980, three specimens were discovered some two metres above the

ground, beneath the loose bark of a dead mango tree. The tree had been attacked and destroyed by the termite *Mastotermes darwiniensis*, and the blind snakes were amongst the soil and debris of the termite runs. It is not clear if the snakes were in fact within the termite runs.

*Mastotermes* is a particularly destructive termite which nests beneath the ground and constructs extensive subterranean runs. To what extent if any *Typhlina bramina* is associated with *Mastotermes* and its subterranean runs is not known, but it seems likely that in this instance the blind snakes used the termite runs to climb two metres into a mango tree.